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## WAR, CAPITALISM, ECOLOGY: WHY CAN'T BRUNO LATOUR UNDERSTAND ANYTHING ABOUT THEM?

ECONOFICTION CAPITAL DESTRUCTION, IMPERIALISM, MARXISM, PRODUCTION, WAR

Faced with the war that has broken out in Ukraine, the philosopher-ecologist is lost. Overwhelmed by the events, he “does not know how to cope with the two tragedies at once,” that is, Ukraine and global warming. The only claim he advances is that our interest in the one ought not take precedence over our interest in the other. He makes no headway in grasping their relationship; yet they are, in fact, tightly linked, and even share a common origin. For him to

recognize this, it would be necessary for Latour to admit the existence of capitalism, which is the framework wherein the two wars emerge and unfold.

Wars between States and those of class, race, and gender have always accompanied Capital's development because, on the basis of primitive accumulation, they are the conditions of its existence. The formation of classes (of workers, slaves and the colonized, women) implies an extra-economic violence that founds domination as well as a violence that preserves it, stabilizing and reproducing the relations between victor and vanquished. There is no Capital without class war, race war, gender war, and without the State, which possesses the force and means of waging them! War and wars are not external realities, but are constitutive of the relation of Capital, even if we have forgotten this fact. Wars do not break out in capitalism because of some mean and nasty autocrats on one side and kind and friendly democrats on the other.

The war and the wars that we find at the onset of each cycle of accumulation, we also tend to rediscover at their end. Under capitalism, they provoke catastrophes and spread death to a degree that is scarcely comparable during other epochs. But there was a moment in the history of capitalism, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the relationship between war, the state, and Capital developed in such a way that its relative destructive power, which forms a condition of its development (its engine, says Schumpeter, in defining it as "creative destruction"), now became absolute. Absolute, because it places the very conditions of humanity at stake, alongside that of many other species.

## THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND ABSOLUTE DESTRUCTION

Disciples of the Anthropocene disagree about the date of its commencement: the Neolithic, the conquest of the Americas, the Industrial Revolution, the great post-war acceleration, etc. They all carefully avoid confronting the rupture announced by the First World War, whose truly harmful consequences continue to act in our current affairs.

The great shift that forever altered the two-headed machine of State/capital in the 20th century occurred long before the outbreak of the 1929 financial crisis, during the war of 1914. The novelty of the Great War resided in the integration it accomplished between the State, economic monopolies, society, work, science, and technology. The cooperation of all these elements in the construction of a megamachine of production for war profoundly changed the function of each of them: in order to respond to "emergencies," the State now accentuated executive power to the detriment of legislative and judiciary power, the economy experiences a similar concentration of political power in the form of the consolidation of monopolies, while society in its entirety (and not just the world of work) is mobilized for production; finally, scientific and technological innovation is now subsumed under the direct control of the State while undergoing a violent acceleration.

Ernst Junger, the "hero" of the First World War describes it thus: it constitutes less an "armed action" than a "gigantic work process." By expanding an organization of production that concerned only a very small number of companies, the war became an occasion for the



implication of all of society in production. "Countries were transformed into gigantic factories capable of mass-producing military services 24/7 so as to be ready to send them to the front where a bloody process of consumption, still completely mechanized, played the role of the market."

The implication of every social function in the sphere of production (what Marxists speak of as the subsumption of society by Capital) was born in that moment and is marked, and will forever be marked, by war. Every form of activity, "even that of a house worker working at their sewing machine," is destined for the war economy and participates in its total mobilization.



"Alongside armies fighting each other on battlefields emerge armies of a new type, transport armies, logistics armies, weapons industry armies, work armies," armies of communication, armies of science and technology, etc. The logistics of war prove to be more efficient than the commercial logistics of capital.

It is in this sense that we can speak of "total" war. It requires economic, political, and social mobilization, which is to say a "total production." Between war, monopolies, and the State, a knot develops that no liberalism will be able to untie — not even neoliberalism will be able to bring back the market of supply and demand and free competition.

The birth of what Marx called the "general intellect" (the fact that production does not only depend on the direct labor of workers, but on the activity and cooperation of society in its entirety, of communication, science, and technology, etc.) happens under the sign of war. In the Marxian general intellect there is no war, whereas in its real establishment, it is indeed war that completes the whole. The capitalism that total war inaugurates is different from the one described by Marx. Hahlweg, the German scholar who published Clausewitz's complete works,

perfectly summarizes this change which affects capitalism at the turn of the 20th century: in Lenin, war takes the place of economic crises in Marx.

For his part, Keynes claimed that his economic program could only be realized in a war economy, for only in that case are the entirety of productive forces pushed to the limit of their possibilities.

This formidable machine in which war and production merge gives rise to an acceleration, since it ensures a leap in the development of the organization of work, science, and technology; the coordination and synergy of different productive forces and social functions translates into an increase in production and productivity. *But production and productivity are here in the service of destruction.* For the first time in the history of capitalism, production is “social,” while identified with destruction. The increase in production is oriented toward increasing the capacity to destroy.

So begins a mad dash for new inventions and discoveries aimed at the growth of destructive powers: destroying the enemy and its army, but also its population and the infrastructure of the country. This process finds its completion in the construction of the atomic bomb during the Second World War. Science, the highest expression of social being's creativity and productivity, radically expands destructive power: henceforth, the atomic bomb puts the very survival of humanity into question.

On this topic, Günter Anders observes that, if humans were individually mortal and humanity immortal prior to the First World War, then following the construction of the atomic bomb, the identity of production and destruction directly threatens humanity with death. For the first time in its history, the human species is in danger of disappearing thanks to the power of one subsection of men within it — capitalists, men of the State, the wealthy classes, etc.

This jump in the politico-economic organization of the two-headed State/Capital machine was a response to the danger of socialism that haunted Europe, as well as a preventative action against the class, race, and gender wars brewing at the heart of socialism (in spite of the organizations that structured it) and which would continue to develop throughout the 20th century.

## THE GREAT ACCELERATION

The agency of this new organization of the State/Capital machine did not disappear upon the cessation of active hostilities, since “total mobilization” for “total production,” the administration of emergencies, the concentration of executive power and economic power, of temporary states of exception linked to the urgency of war, transformed into everyday *norms* of capitalist administration.

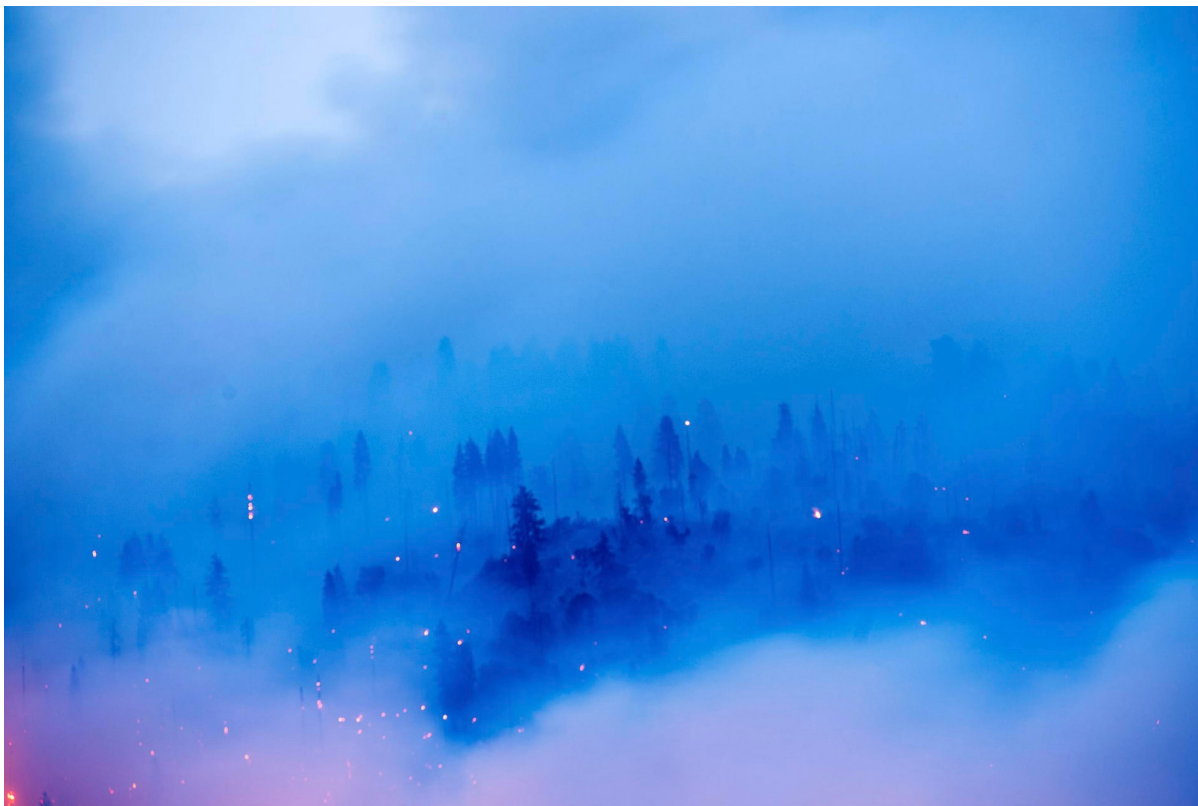
Ecologists call the period after the Second World War the “great acceleration.” Within it, we find, intact and embedded into the daily work and consumption of the economic “boom” the same identity of production and destruction that had been affirmed during the two total wars.

During the post-war phase of reconstruction, the integrated productive machine was not dismantled but reinvested anew. As we shall see, the reparation for damages caused by the war

will configure a new and even more formidable destruction: with the great acceleration, we have taken an enormous step toward the point of no return as concerns the degradation of climatic and biospheric equilibrium.

Post-war capitalism continues to exploit the integration that was born during total war by producing extraordinary rates of growth and productivity, to which correspond equally extraordinary rates of destruction of the planet's conditions of habitability. The human species (alongside many other living things) is threatened a second time with disappearance. It is no longer "nature" that "threatens" humanity, but the classes that "direct" this economico-political machine.

This identity of production and destruction unfolds within the framework of a "peace" whose conditions of possibility are always established by war: *cold* in the North and *very hot* in the South, where the "global civil war" forecasted by Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt in 1961 finds itself concentrated. Only a Eurocentric illusion can allow one to consider the "*trente glorieuses*" as a period of peace.



The great acceleration is inconceivable without the consensus of the labor movement, which reinforces its integration with capitalism and the state, an integration that began with its support (in the form of the *vote des crédits*) for the First World War. In the Global North, the Fordist compromise between capital and labor in the Post-War period is based on an unspoken consensus that veils the identity of production and destruction that "total mobilization" for "total production" has now left to the functioning of capitalism. The labor movement will limit itself to demanding wages and workers' rights, leaving full power to the State/Capital machine when it comes to deciding on the content of work and the purposes of production. The compromise acts

as if the identity of production and destruction only concerned the time of war, particularly when it comes to the concepts of work and the worker. Günter Anders is the first to sketch the shifting meaning of such terms under the new realities of capitalism: "The moral status of the product (the status of poisonous gas or that of the hydrogen bomb) casts no shadow on the morality of the worker who participates in its production," he writes. It is politically inconceivable "that the product to be produced, even the most repugnant one, could contaminate the work itself." Work, like the money whose condition it is, "has no smell." "No work can be morally discredited by its purpose."

The purposes of production must not concern the laborer in any manner, for — and "it is one of the most gruesome characteristics of our era" — labor must be considered "morally neutral... whatever work we perform, the product of that work always remains beyond good and evil." The trade unions and the workers' movement have pledged the "secret oath" of "not seeing, or rather not knowing what (labor) was doing," to "not take its purpose into account."

In the conditions of contemporary capitalism, the situation is further radicalized. All work (and not only that which produced "poisonous gas or the hydrogen bomb") is destructive; all consumption (and not only flying by plane) is destructive. It is henceforth undecidable whether labor or consumption produces existence or destroys it, because they are forces of production and destruction at one and the same time.

In capitalism, individuals are simultaneously reluctant "accomplices" of destruction, since they produce destruction by laboring and consuming, and victims of exploitation and domination since they are forced to manufacture catastrophe. We have no other alternative than to break these bonds of subordination that objectively render us accomplices, to extract ourselves from these relations of labor and consumption — that is to say, to see the refusal of work and consumption to its conclusion.

## SO-CALLED "NEOLIBERALISM"

The strategy of the State/Capital machine unabashedly takes over the slogan "total mobilization" for "total production" that the capital-labor compromise had practiced, but not preached. The economico-political matrix is still the one outlined during the First World War, whose new globalization, intensification of financialization, and concentration of political and economic power only augments its productive and destructive dimensions by exalting its authoritarian and anti-democratic characteristics.

Neoliberalism was not only born in the civil wars of Latin America, but feeds off all the wars that the Americans and NATO have declared around the world, first against an enemy that they themselves helped create (Islamist terrorism) and then against the powers that emerged from anti-colonial wars of liberation (the real target of the current war is China).

Contemporary globalization is very different from that which occurred throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Whereas the latter had the colonial division of the world as its aim, the present day one can no longer count on a South subjected to the West. On the contrary, the ex-colonies



are economico-political powers that cause the North to falter — the latter being devoid of any idea capable of establishing its hegemony if not by arms. The Global South poses two new problems. Forms of neo-capitalism adopted by the ex-colonies will only augment the extension of production/destruction while proving that the activities (*l'action*) of the center's State-capital machine cannot be extended to the rest of humanity: globalized capitalism carries the devastation that the great acceleration had already magnified in the Post-War period to the point of irreversibility.



The assertion of their power (paradoxically caused by a globalization that was, on the contrary, supposed to ensure the beginning of a new American century) rekindled the confrontation between imperialisms that the USA had for years sought to transform into open war. Blinded by its war-thirsty delirium, the Global North has had difficulty grasping that it now constitutes a minority, and not merely from a demographic point of view (even with regard to the current war, the majority of countries have not aligned themselves with the position of the North because they know who has been and still is targeted by the dominating Yankee arrogance).

There is another striking similarity with the past: the violence that Europe exerted on its colonies was finally returned to the continent in the form of total wars and fascisms. Aimé Césaire liked to say that what we reproached Hitler with was not his “colonial” methods, but their use against whites. After thirty years of war waged by the Americans and NATO throughout the world, armed violence returns to Europe, imposed by the USA and accepted by States and local elites completely subjected to the American will. The war is now set to endure, for the Americans will not release the armed pressure until they succeed in constructing the *Impossible Empire*, a project that is both suicidal and homicidal. The suffering of humanity for the coming years is well encapsulated by Biden’s statement: “working to make America lead the world once again.” This is

the real program of his presidency. The one officially proclaimed during the presidential campaign — to curb the nascent civil war — has been progressively abandoned.

Keynes' words suit the tragedy of war just as well as they do the ecological catastrophe: the hegemony of finance capital, which led to the First World War, contained a "self-destructive rule" governing "every aspect of existence," a financial rule of self-destruction that remains operative today. The violence that capitalists and the State release already contains ecological catastrophe, because in order to protect themselves, profit, property, and power are "capable of extinguishing the sun and the stars."

## THE WAR BETWEEN POWERS AND THE WAR AGAINST "GAIA" HAVE THE SAME ORIGINS

To believe that Russia is the cause of a potential third world war is like believing the assassination in Sarajevo was the cause of the first. It is intellectual and political laziness.

A century ago, Rosa Luxemburg had already grasped the impossibility of completing the globalization of capital, and thus the inevitability of imperial war: Capital, "having a tendency to become a world form, breaks itself over its incapacity to actually become this world form of production." It cannot become global capital because it depends on the Nation-State as much for its realization of surplus-value and the appropriation thereof (private property is guaranteed by its laws and force) as for its "regulation." As Deleuze and Guattari put it, without the State, Capital would send its flows to the moon.

The machine of accumulation and its tendency to ceaselessly expand (the world market) rests on a tension between State and Capital, even though both fully participate in its function. Capital expresses a "tendency to become global" that cannot be fulfilled, for it has neither the political nor military force necessary for its ambitions. The State, by contrast, exercises these two powers, but its foundation is territorial, with borders and rival States. It is useless to oppose Capital (with its entirely relative immanence) to the State (with its very real sovereignty), since they always act in concert.

The failure of contemporary globalization is very similar to the failure of the preceding globalization between the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. This one, too, can only end in war, for when finance capital collapses, States and their armies will advance to compete for hegemony over the world market.

The current global "disorder" (a multiplicity of centers of power constituted by large spaces, but at the center of which there are always States) that the Americans would like to reduce to an *impossible imperial order* (impossible because it has already failed), risks descending into a still greater chaos regardless of who comes out victorious.

In place of cosmopolitanism, the great globalization has only been able to produce identitarian logics since Capital, in order not to collapse after the financial debacle of 2008, carrying capitalist "civilization" off with it, had to nestle itself under the protective wing of the State, which



itself can only live off identity: nationalism, fascism, racism, sexism.

In capitalism, differences do not differentiate themselves by producing unpredictable novelties (as the philosophy of difference either ingeniously or irresponsibly asserts), but become polarized (inequalities in income, assets, schooling, health, etc.) to the point that they become contradictions. Failing to transform themselves into oppositions to the State/capital machine, they are fixed into identities at the center of which one always finds the white man. Nationalist, racist, and sexist identities are the largely fulfilled conditions of the production of war subjectivities. The anti-Russian hysteria unleashed by the media, the racist hatred by which they distinguish combatants and victims alike (whites from nonwhites) was anticipated by a long labor of the "symbolic" destruction of subjectivity that cultivated a fascist becoming primed with excitement for war.

We are nearing the completion of a process that began a little over a century ago, picking up speed over the last 70 years: the closure of all "public space," the saturation of each and every aspect of individual and collective life by private property. This is a process of a completely different scope than the "sanitary dictatorship" invoked by Agamben. The state of emergency is the normality that must necessarily accompany the identity of production and destruction because it has been progressing since the start of the 20th century, embedding itself in the State/Capital machine whose promises of peace and prosperity last only as long as a "*belle époque*."



Even a superficial analysis of capitalism and its history is enough to understand that, after a very short period of euphoria (the *belle époque* of the turn of the century, and later of the 1980s and 1990s) during which capitalism seemed to triumph over all contradictions, it has only war and

fascism left by which it can overcome its impasses.

“Prosperity for all” has turned into an enormous concentration of wealth for a few people, into financial devastation and fights to the death for economic hegemony and access to resources. The exchange of obedience for the conservation of life that, since Hobbes, the State was supposed to guarantee against the dangers of the “war of all against all” is here doubly refuted: by the orchestration of massacres of industrial war, and by the extinction of the human species already well underway.

Biopolitics (“make live and let die”) reveals all its “ideological” content when faced by the reality of the State/Capital machine, which unleashed the economic violence of the former pole only in order to then release the armed violence of the latter. Two violences which, combined, are quite removed from the governmental pacification implied by phrase “letting live.”

The possible disappearance of humanity via the concentrated violence of the atomic bomb about which Günther Anders spoke in the 1950s is today revived by the “diffuse violence” of global warming, the degradation of the biosphere, soil depletion, over-exploitation of the earth, etc. Two different temporalities — the instantaneity of the bomb and the duration of ecological degradation — converge toward the same result because they flow from the same source, the identity of production/destruction. In the current war in Ukraine, we live under a double threat: one atomic, which never disappeared, and the other “ecological.” What Latour fails to see, current events have taken upon themselves to show us. The war will, at least, have served to reveal one thing: the inconsistency of a large part of ecological thought and its most prestigious intellectuals.

## POSTSCRIPT: A CRISIS OF ONTOLOGY

The identity of production and destruction points to a crisis in the conception of being whose productive power philosophy has sought to affirm (being as creation, a continuous process of expansion, a construction of the world and of man). This long history of being is overturned by the First World War, after which the *self-production* of being coincides with its *self-destruction*. The philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s failed to recognize this new situation in any way. On the contrary, they doubled down on being's power of invention, proliferation, and differentiation. The negative of destruction was expelled from thought right at the moment that being, under the regime of total production, became comparable to a “geological” force capable of modifying the earth's morphology, while destroying the conditions of its habitability. The critique of the negative focused on the Hegelian dialectic, but it failed to problematize the absolute negation that the new face of capitalism harbored within it. At the moment that being seemed to be enriched by the continuous production of new singularities, it is consumed, exhausted, and even threatened with extinction. Such is the unprecedented situation that philosophy avoids like the plague.

The identity of production and destruction obliges us to reconsider not only the category of work, but all those productive forces that might seek to inherit the power of being. Total war and the conjoined acceleration of Capital, of the State, of science/technology, and of work have



rendered the Marxian opposition between forces of production and relations of production inoperative, because *productive forces* are at the same time *destructive forces*. In the 19th century, work and its partners, science and technology, seemed to constitute a power of creation imprisoned in relations of production (specifically, private property and the State that secured it). They needed to be freed from the grip of the latter so that they could develop those productive powers heretofore constrained by profit, private property, and class hierarchies. Under post-total war conditions of capitalism, it is undecidable if work is production or destruction, since it is both at the same time. For this reason, there can be no ontology of work: the modalities of political action must be rethought.

Battles, refusal, revolts, cooperation, “reparative” activities, solidarities, and revolutions are always on the table, and the break with capitalism is more necessary today than ever, since what is at stake is the very life of the species; but all this appears within a framework radically modified by the existence of destruction, which production casts alongside it like a shadow.

*Translated from the French by Eric Aldieri.*

*First published by Revista Disenso, March 28th, 2022.*

*Images: Noah Berger*

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